

# India's quiet acceptance of the annexation of Crimea reflects its vision for a multi-polar world order

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**Miko Brown** argues that even though the new BJP-led government continues to eschew making strong normative claims about how the international system ought to be structured, the cautious response to the Ukraine crisis and scepticism toward democracy promotion abroad reflects India's ambition for a more balanced world order.



When asked in a CNN interview how India views Russia's annexation of Crimea, the new Prime Minister answered, "a lot of people want to give advice, but look within them and they too have sinned in some way. Ultimately, [India's viewpoint](#) is that efforts need to be made to sit together and talk and to resolve problems in an ongoing process." India is reluctant to make powerful normative statements on how the international relations ought to be and, in contrast to Western states, is ambiguous in identifying which parties are in the right and which in the wrong in this conundrum.

India's unwillingness to openly criticise Russian actions in the Ukraine has been associated with lingering socialist sentiments from stronger relations during the Cold War or else with India's increasingly pragmatic foreign policy based on economic linkages. However, under closer scrutiny India's response to the Ukraine Crisis illuminates a nascent Indian vision of the world order with a specific end goal in mind – to restore India's destined greatness. India's perception of how the international system ought to be structured is expressed first through India's scepticism towards democracy promotion abroad, and secondly through India's desire for a multi-polar world, in which Russia is one of the key actors.



Image credit: [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru)

The lack of strong public statements on the Crimean issue stems from doubt towards the relationship between democracy promotion and Indian foreign policy. Although it is the world's largest democracy, India is reluctant to publically issue normative statements on valuing a world composed of democratic sovereign states and promoting democracy transitions in countries where these regimes do not (or only nominally) exist. India did not support American and Western European actions during the Kiev protests due to its commitment to respect for internal sovereignty and non-intervention in the internal jurisdiction of other states.

Aside from Indian foreign policy values, part of the unwillingness to promote democracy internationally could be that

it would open up the black box of past Indian interventions on the subcontinent, such as in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. In addition, actively supporting democracy and enhanced democratisation processes on the international stage could lead to a too critical reflection and a consequential debate of the value of democracy at home: India still suffers from high levels of political corruption, lack of genuine and effective poverty relief programmes, and a persistent caste system that can inhibit social mobility. Therefore, the dearth of democracy promotion efforts and rhetoric could be seen as a tool to protect India's own perceptions of inherent greatness and maintain external views that India is an emerging power.

India does not seek to completely alienate or isolate Russia in the same way as many Western states. For India, international stage should not be constructed around an American hegemonic order; but rather the coordination and existence of multiple great powers ought to be realised. Russia not only has a vital role in India's view of the multi-polar international stage, but Russia offers direct benefits to the further development of India as an emerged power. Under the Modi government relations with Vladimir Putin's Russia seem to be improving. In July during a BRICS meeting Modi, in a private comment, [reportedly told Putin](#) that "Even a child in India, if asked to say who is India's best friend, will reply it is Russia because Russia has been with India in times of crisis." Russia is a top supplier of defence materials to India, and since India is currently the world's [leading weapons importer](#), this relationship is crucial to bolstering India's domestic defence apparatus with future potential for enhanced R&D and manufacturing capabilities. In terms of engagement within international institutions, Russia is willing to use its United Nations Security Council veto power to [support India](#), for instance from deterring votes on the Kashmir issue.

On 11<sup>th</sup> December 2014, Putin arrived in New Delhi. As a [result of this brief summit](#), India will build ten new nuclear reactors with the help of Russia and the two states will work on jointly-manufacturing a fifth generation fighter aircraft. However, Putin did not come alone. Also on Putin's flight was [Sergey Aksyonov](#), the leader of Crimea, who proceeded to his own meeting to sign a memorandum with the Indian-Crimean Partnership in an effort to increase Indian trade with the Black Sea Region. This annual summit and the presence of Aksyonov highlights the importance of Russia as one of the pieces of India's ideal international relations that is based on a multi-polar reality rather than utopian visions of democracy promotion.

India continues to eschew making strong normative claims on the international stage of how the world ought to be, even though the 2014 Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) election manifesto stated that the "[BJP believes a resurgent India](#) must get its rightful place in the comity of nations and international institutions." India, particularly under BJP rule, feels entitled to a seat at the table of the world powers. India's quiet acceptance of the Russian annexation of Crimea represents an Indian vision for a world order that neither aspires to democracy transitions abroad nor is dominated by a sole actor, but is multi-polar and defined by many great powers. However, in order to claim its seat, especially external recognition of this vis-à-vis other states and make the desire for a multi-polar world a reality, a more proactive approach may still be necessary.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the India at LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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